



# Get off our land

Patrick Barkham reports  
on the threats facing Traveller sites

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Children play in the Dale Farm Traveller site in Essex  
Photograph: Suzanne Plunkett/Reuters



# 'We're not wanted'

Local councils say they can no longer cope with the number of travellers

**A**s the rain fills the potholes in the rough track outside, Mary McCarthy sits beneath a towering vase of burgundy and cream artificial roses and gestures around her immaculate living room. "This might look like a house to you but it's a chalet. It can be broken down into two pieces and moved."

Broken down and moved is the fate that awaits McCarthy and 86 Traveller families who have made a secluded field in the Essex countryside their home for the past decade. This month Basildon council voted to devote up to £8m, one third of its annual budget, to evict the families of Dale Farm and destroy the community they have created in an old scrap yard on green belt land.

The battle over Dale Farm, one of the largest unauthorised Traveller sites in Europe, shows how Gypsies and Travellers are being pummelled by a perfect storm. The Channel 4 documentary *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* confirmed popular prejudices that Gypsies are wealthy, vulgar freeloaders and spawned a rash of "My big fat Gypsy . . ." headlines. Public sector cuts are hitting Traveller education services while squeezed budgets mean local authorities are even less willing to provide sites for Gypsies. Temporary planning permissions, issued to many Travellers five years ago by councils desperate to make controversial caravan sites disappear, are expiring. This year, temporary permissions for 50 Gypsy families will run out in South Cambridgeshire alone - leaving Travellers mired in an expensive and chronically insecure planning tangle. And now, most alarmingly of all for Travellers, councils are evicting them to a clamour of supportive comments from David Cameron and Eric Pickles, the Conservative local government secretary - who is fast turning his personal track record of vehement opposition to unauthorised Traveller sites into government policy.

When McCarthy and her relatives pulled up at Dale Farm 10 years ago it appeared an ideal solution to the problem of life on the road. McCarthy, a great-grandmother, remembered the scrap yard from her travelling days because it was a rare place where they

could pull up and get water. Adjacent to the busy dual carriageway around Basildon, with pylons overhead and two catteries for neighbours, the scrap yard was far from idyllic. That suited the Travellers: with a large Gypsy site next door where residents had obtained planning permission in the 1970s, they believed they would be left alone. They were wrong. After 10 years of failed planning applications and the opposition of neighbours and Conservative-run Basildon council, the 400 residents of Dale Farm are now a 28-day eviction notice away from being thrown off their land.

Unlike many neat Travellers' sites, Dale Farm is currently a sorry sight. Some plots are derelict and strewn with rubbish, corrugated iron fences are collapsing and an adjacent field is littered with bottles and toys. The eviction threat is "absolutely dreadful" says McCarthy, who says they would clear up the mess if they were not losing their homes. "It's a nightmare really. It's frightening, thinking the bulldozers are going to come in after 10 years. We're not squatting. We bought and paid for the land. It was a scrap yard. It wasn't like it was a lovely beauty spot and Travellers ruined it." McCarthy insists that eviction will make them homeless. "It's not that we're saying we won't go - where will we go?" she says. "We'll have to pull on to other people's land, car parks and laybys, but travelling life is finished now. They've done away with that. We can't do that any more."

The laws and attitudes of modern society make no space for nomadic life. Most Travellers are forced to accept an uneasy compromise: a plot, or pitch, of their own, so they can send their children to school, but caravans and chalets rather than bricks and mortar, so they can live in extended families and travel in the holidays. For all the tabloid furore over unauthorised Gypsy sites, there are 14,510 caravans on council and private sites with planning permission in England and just 3,636 caravans without; these unauthorised sites could be legally accommodated on as little as one square mile of land.

This modest need has not been met in the past decade, however, because councils are reluctant to identify suitable plots of land for Gypsies.

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◀ The eviction of Dale Farm is no exception. Basildon council has successfully removed travellers from another site while six Traveller families were last week told by South Cambridgeshire district council they would be evicted from Smithy Fen, Cottenham. "We're not wanted anywhere. We're not wanted in the countryside. We're not wanted in the town," says Candy Sheridan, a Liberal Democrat councillor and traveller who helps others through the labyrinthine planning process.

Time and again, she finds applications for sites rejected on grounds of "visual impact". "What 'visual impact' means is that councillors don't want to see us. We are part of the countryside and we have been for 600 years. We have more right to be there than they do."

Under Labour, councils were obliged to provide a certain number of sites for travellers alongside regular housing in their development plans. Basildon was supposed to provide 84 pitches in addition to the 100 authorised (mostly privately owned) pitches it already has. But the coalition has signalled it will scrap these regional targets, so councils are disregarding them. Basildon council says instead it will provide three new pitches each year to meet demand.

South Cambridgeshire district council has no plan to provide or approve any gypsy site at all, despite having more caravans than any other local authority in the country. Sheridan, who is full of good sense and pragmatic solutions, is actually sympathetic towards local councillors; the objections,

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they back travellers. A gypsy site is on a par with an asylum-seeker centre, a prison or a wind turbine", in terms of popularity with the propertied classes, reckons Sheridan.

Joseph G Jones of the Gypsy Council puts it more bluntly: "It's racially motivated isn't it? Is there anybody for a moment speaking honestly who wouldn't admit that? Nobody wants a gypsy site next to their house. They fear their house price might go down and they have an irrational fear of gypsies and travellers and a fear of crime, which they think is going to come from a site in the area. It's very simple."

Tony Ball, the leader of Basildon council, has spent much of his career tackling the Dale Farm conflict. How is an £8m eviction (Basildon's emergency fund will cover a potential eight-week stand-off with bailiffs; the Essex policing bill is estimated at an additional £10m) a good use of taxpayers' money? "Look at the alternatives. If a council turns a blind eye to law-breaking what moral right do we have to enforce against anybody else who breaches planning laws?" He insists the dispute is simply about unauthorised construction on greenbelt: a six-bedroom house is being demolished nearby. "Green belt is there for a reason. It is to stop urban sprawl."

Ball points out that Dale Farm residents own four unoccupied but legal pitches on Smithy Fen, Cambridgeshire, "but they say they prefer to remain where they are. Perhaps I would prefer to live in Mayfair if I could afford it," he says. Four pitches would only house

opposition sound like a vendetta. Is it? "Not at all. You or I wouldn't be able to build on green belt without permission," he says. "We are communicating with the Gypsy Council, these negotiations will go on up until the day - if it has to happen - of us carrying out the forced eviction. I'm in dialogue and I very much hope not to spend the money, but after 10 years there comes a time when you have to say enough is enough and the law has to be upheld."

Most constituents seem to support Ball's view. People wonder why gypsies can't "play by the rules" - and why they can't just live in a house. David Cameron knew he was speaking for a large number of the static community when he talked of Dale Farm and "the sense of unfairness that one law applies to everybody else and, on too many occasions, another law applies to travellers". Basildon council is obliged by law to provide for the homeless and it has offered Dale Farm residents flats and houses. "There is no need for the elderly, the vulnerable or the young to live by the roadside because we have offered them a roof over their heads where they can continue their education and healthcare," says Ball.

Around half the gypsy community now lives in houses, but for many, like McCarthy, living behind bricks and mortar would be torture. A house can be both claustrophobic and isolating when you have grown up in a caravan. Dale Farm may look tatty but there is a strong, vital community here. Women

DIGRAPHS MARY TURNER AND SUSAN CRAIG-GREENE  
THE GUARDIAN/SUZANNE PLUNKETT/REUTERS



in their vans, teenagers muck about, relaying messages to their aunts.

"I have a lot of friends in the settled community. They say: 'It's lovely the way you people run in and out and talk to one another, I don't even know my neighbours.' And you feel safe living next to one another because we get a lot of stick," says McCarthy. One of her daughters, who prefers to remain anonymous, chips in: "You know the children are safe if they go out to play." The community protects the old as well. "Old people dependent on their young as carers would suddenly be isolated in a distant council flat," explains Grattan Puxon, a traveller who lives near Dale Farm. "They wouldn't survive it."

Sheridan is convinced there are practical solutions for hard-pressed councils. Gypsies don't want to live on council-run sites; they want to run their own and, if supported by council loans, can do so through Community Land Trusts; the first has been established by (Conservative) Mendip district council in Somerset. Even more alluring is a £60m pot of central government money to help councils fund sites. Sheridan's local council, North Norfolk, dipped into this fund to create two "transit camps" where travellers are not allowed to stay for more than three months - without spending any local taxpayers' money. Astonishingly, according to Sheridan, many councils do not even know about this £60m.

Others ignore it. Ball says Basildon has not used this fund to find alternatives to Dale Farm because "we just do not have

Sheridan still believes Basildon can save money, save council jobs and stop traumatic evictions - and she is helping Dale Farm residents make three new applications for small sites in Basildon to provide alternative pitches. Ball cannot comment on the possible success of specific applications, but he is clear about one thing: Basildon cannot provide new pitches for all of Dale Farm. In an ideal world, would the Dale Farm travellers move away from Basildon? "Absolutely," he says.

While a few Lib Dems, notably Lord Avebury, are lobbying vigorously for gypsies within the coalition, travellers have noticed a chill wind of change in government. "With David Cameron making the comments he made last week about Dale Farm, it is open season now," believes Jones. "The coalition has just turned its back on the community." As MP for Brentwood - next door to Basildon - Eric Pickles has taken a strong personal stance against unauthorised traveller sites. Now his much-vaunted localism bill will free councils from their obligations to provide a certain number of sites and outlaw retrospective planning permission, which has been virtually the only way travellers have managed to get sites approved. "Labour had a bit of heart for us. They were willing to try and help us but this government . . ." McCarthy trails off. "If they could get a toxic spray to do away with us they would."

Ball says his appeals to Westminster for help have been ignored by both Labour and the coalition. "The government may change but civil servants

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with the failure to recognise that this is a national issue and not just a Basildon council issue."

According to Thomas Acton, professor of Romani studies at the University of Greenwich, Labour was far from perfect and only really began addressing housing and education for travellers after 2003. "You provide sites, you get on with the slow, stubborn work of community relations and then the problem goes away," says Acton. "Once you have gypsy sites working well, nobody notices them." He believes the eviction at Dale Farm must be resisted. "If the Basildon eviction goes smoothly and Eric Pickles is emboldened by that to turf travellers out of their homes we could see things getting much worse," says Acton. "That's why the battle of Basildon has to be fought to the last moment and the eviction has to be made as expensive as possible. If Basildon rolls over, the Tories will come back to the other sites where travellers have been living legally for years."

Protesters - "anarchists," says Ball - are likely to join residents in resisting eviction from Dale Farm. "It's obvious that people are going to go out and fight for their homes. They are not going to say 'hello, how are you?' and let their homes be taken away," says McCarthy. She vows that protests will be non-violent. Other Dale Farm travellers, with the bravado of the desperate, are less placatory. "We've been putting our arguments in court and to the council and it hasn't done us any good," says one. "Come back when the bailiffs are here. You'll get a good story